

**Possessed by whiteness: Interracial affiliations and racial melancholia in**

**Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

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Drawing on whiteness studies and psychoanalytical theory, this article explores representations of interracial relationships as a means to claim and/or contest the ideal of whiteness in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In Hamid's novel, the 9/11 attacks trigger a crisis in self-identification for model-minority Pakistani protagonist Changez, which proves illuminating in terms of the invisible racial subjugation exerted so far upon him by Jim, Changez's passport into the corporate world, and by Erica, his (white) lifeline to exclusive Manhattan. The article focuses on the ways in which Hamid uses the post 9/11 context to reveal the racial melancholia surreptitiously informing today's "new" versions of the American Dream, which is apparent in Changez's and Erica's relationship as well as in their parallel impossible mourning of the broken mirror of "white" Am/Erica. Emphasizing the extent to which whiteness and racial melancholia permeate the discourse of assimilation, Hamid's book rewrites the "new" American Dream as what Anne Anlin Cheng has called a "fantasy built on absences".

**Keywords:** America; melancholia; race; whiteness; Mohsin Hamid; model minority.

Towards the end of the 20th century, as the propagation of new discourses of ethnic success generated new versions of the American Dream, "America" came to signify not only immigrant mobility and whiteness, but also multiculturalism. As Inderpal

Grewal argues in *Transnational America*, this paradox of sorts was only made possible through a slippage in the meaning of “white”, within which whiteness still connoted Anglo-America, yet extended its meaning to include a more heterogeneous group that passed as white through the endorsement of culturally-specific consumerist practices and middle-class norms of behaviour. Posing as multicultural, yet covertly fastening whiteness to an ideal Americanness, these so-called new versions of the American Dream elevated the Asian American communities to model minority status, thus helping to rationalize the idea that a relative whiteness could somehow be acquired by non-white minority groups.

Like Grewal, Anne Anlin Cheng is unimpressed by the rhetorical privilege granted to Asian Americans, which perpetuates racial hierarchies by projecting a “second best” position upon this community. Highly critical of the “contemporary American attachment to progress and healing” (7), of today’s political or theoretical discourses that are eager to project a “colorblind” American society at the risk of silencing the painful histories of slavery, colonization or diaspora, and of leaving their repercussions unexamined in the long run, Cheng is determined to uncover the invisible racial dynamics that pervade the “fantasy of ethnicities” (37) upon which the melting-pot ideology is now based. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng examines the ways in which such a fantasy is manifested in key Asian American cultural productions, with a view to revealing the extent to which racial ideals in fact constitute the hidden counterpart of what is often perceived as the Asian American “manic” relation to the American Dream (23). Her research shows the ways in which this phenomenon, which she terms racial melancholia, shapes not only both dominant white identity and the subjectivity of those who are presented as “racial others”, but also constitutes the very stuff of the American Dream, its “ghost in the machine”, to

borrow Toni Morrison's phrase ("Unspeakable" 136). Associating the dialectics of mourning and melancholia with the suspended form of assimilation recurrently experienced by non-white groups, in particular by Asian Americans who identify with the "positive" model-minority stereotype, Cheng more generally posits that racial melancholia represents both "the technology and the nightmare of the American Dream" (xi).

By applying Cheng's theoretical framework to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Mohsin Hamid's latest work, my aim is to explore the ways in which the concept of racial melancholia throws into relief important aspects of the book, notably the representation of interracial relationships as a means to claim and/or contest the ideal of whiteness. In Hamid's novel, the 9/11 attacks trigger a crisis in self-identification for model-minority Pakistani protagonist Changez, which indeed proves retroactively illuminating in terms of the invisible racial subjugation exerted so far upon him by Jim, his passport into the corporate world, and by Erica, his (white) lifeline to exclusive Manhattan. Hamid uses the post 9/11 context to reveal the racial melancholia surreptitiously informing today's "new" versions of the American Dream – a melancholia which is apparent in Changez's and Erica's relationship as well as in their parallel impossible mourning of the broken mirror of "white" Am/Erica. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* represents Changez and Erica as mutual objects of melancholia, while also presenting them as melancholic subjects who are equally unable to "get over" the lost ideal of whiteness. More than just emblemizing two interconnected aspects of American racial culture – what Cheng typifies as "dominant, white culture's rejection and yet attachment to the racial other" and on the other hand, "the ramifications that such paradox holds for the racial other, who has been placed in a suspended position" (xi) – Changez's and Erica's

parallel trajectories suggest that dominant white identity guarantees its centrality and invisibility *through* the racial other, that is, by objectifying such a lost other as a crypt within which the ideal of whiteness can be both preserved and kept out of sight before being re-projected onto the white subject for self-aggrandizing recognition. Finally, I am interested in showing how Cheng's study provides a new vocabulary with which to understand the parallels Hamid establishes between fundamentalism and melancholia. My contention is that Hamid provocatively suggests that an untenable form of racial subjugation, or possession, might somehow "live on" within fundamentalism itself. Yet, before focusing on Hamid's novel, it is worth outlining the ways in which Cheng applies Freud's formulation of melancholia to the American racial culture.

As is widely known, Freud defines melancholia as a pathological form of unresolved grief for lost objects, places or ideals, whether this loss results from a real death, or from some major ideological disillusionment. Unlike mourning, melancholia denotes a condition in the course of which the gradual letting go of the lost object proves impossible. For the melancholic, loss generates a narcissistic wound, which consequently triggers feelings of ambivalence towards the lost object (as a reaction to the disappointment it causes, or simply because its disappearance, or death, entails the unbearable idea of its irrevocable separateness from the subject). Incapable of acknowledging the reality, even the anatomy, of the loss – Freud crucially defines melancholia as an unconscious process even when loss is occasioned by a real death, in which case the subject "knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in [the lost object]" (Freud 21) – the melancholic denies loss altogether, by taking mental representations of the lost object into the self. Martin S. Bergmann summarizes in a few words the unacknowledged logic of melancholia: "I

have not lost the object because I am it" (7). The suggestion that the melancholic is only able to deny the all-too blatant reality of loss by becoming the lost object or ideal, that is, by incorporating it into himself, clearly represents one of the key aspects of Freud's seminal 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia". But it is by turning to Sándor Ferenczi's 1912 distinction between incorporation and introjection that Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok emphasize a major difference in outcome between mourning and melancholia. Abraham and Torok indeed remark that in opposition to the selective introjection of the lost object that takes place towards the end of the lengthy process of mourning, the instant "recuperative magic" (Torok 114) of melancholic incorporation means that the subject eats up the lost object whole – in both its ideal and its hateful dimensions. Quite graphically, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok write in this respect that the melancholic "swallows" the lost object in order not to swallow its loss (126).

While this incorporation maintains the fiction of possession that stands at the very heart of the melancholic object-relationship, such "dining and self-constituting experience" (8), as Cheng calls it, implies not only that the subject internalizes the hatred he feels towards the lost object, as previously mentioned, but also that the ego empties itself at the same time as it feeds on the "thing-within", since such thing, in reality, boils down to an illusionary, empty form of sustenance. Indeed, what the melancholic consumes *in toto* and self-deceptively keeps alive within his psyche can never be dynamic identifications with an Other that always-already exceed static representations, but frozen narcissistic identifications with the lost object instead, which reduce the latter to a mere thing, an "other-made-ghostly" (Cheng 8) tailored to fit an unchanging melancholic script. This is the turning point where the subject starts identifying with emptiness itself – a moment when, as Freud famously put it,

“the shadow of the object [falls] upon the ego” (25). Now intrinsically confused with the lost object, or rather its lifeless shadow, the melancholic subject cannibalizes himself at the same time as he feeds on the “thing-within”, thus “grow[ing] rich in self-impooverishment” (Cheng 8). Comparing the complex of melancholia with “an open wound” (29), Freud specifies that the transformation of an object-loss into an ego-loss turns self-representation into a battlefield, insofar as it converts “the conflict between the ego and the loved person [or the lost ideal] into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (25). Perhaps surprisingly in such context, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han maintain that melancholic identification with foreclosed dominant norms also represents a mode of (un)being for nonwhite minority groups, a means of claiming an identity for oneself in a social structure where processes of assimilations and the ability to blend in are still conditioned by the never-possible attainment of the ideal of whiteness which, in their view, is bound to remain “a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal” (345) for the raced subject in the US. Emphasizing that the melancholy-inducing character of the western ideals of whiteness is never so acute as when the built-in failure of assimilation is coupled with partial forms of prescribed success (such as economic achievement or academic excellence for instance), Eng and Han argue that Asian Americans symbolize objects of melancholia for a nation organized by “an ecology of whiteness” (349) even while they are impelled to become subjects of melancholia themselves, to the extent that “[they] are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society – in order *to be* at all” (350).

In line with Eng’s and Han’s attempt to present the model minority stereotype as part and parcel of the US “melancholic machine” (Eng & Han 349), yet also to

emphasize the ways in which such a “machine” impacts on the subjectivity of the dominant subject, Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race* looks at Freud’s theory from a different angle and persuasively remarks that the melancholic “cannibalistic project” induces a “form of possession more intimate than any material relationship could produce” (Cheng 9). What Cheng suggests, in other words, is that melancholia can also constitute a covert strategy of interlocking possession and exclusion – an illusionary ego-reinforcing strategy which denies otherness and difference while feigning to embrace it. This is then a strategy in the course of which the melancholic object is simultaneously ingested and resurrected as a one-dimensional, and thus more controllable, edible ghostly counterpart. Extending such model of “exclusion-yet-retention” from individual to group identifications, Cheng observes that melancholia provides a compelling framework for investigating the blind spots surrounding the discourses of American exceptionalism. In particular, it is helpful when discussing the ways in which non-whites as melancholic objects are now apparently included within ethnic versions of the American Dream, even though their racial identity prevents them from being recognized, and often from recognizing themselves, as fully integrated into mainstream culture. Arguably, Cheng is disenchanted with celebratory discourses of multiplicity and hybridity, no less so than Richard Dyer who, in *White*, cautions that “we may be on our way to genuine hybridity, multiplicity without (white) hegemony [ ... ] but we aren’t there yet, and we won’t get there until we see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put in its place and end its rule” (4).

To Cheng, assimilation discourses can be seen to work along especially melancholic lines in the US, because they perpetuate inclusive narratives of Americanness that are bound to remain unattainable for a large number of minority

groups, even as these narratives are in fact presented as constitutive of, and embedded in, the US national fabric. Cheng writes in this respect that:

American melancholia is particularly acute because America is founded on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over. [ ... ] Precisely because the American history of exclusion, imperialism, and colonization runs so antithetical to the equally and particularly American narrative of liberty and individualism, cultural memory poses a continuously vexing problem: How does the nation “go on” while remembering those transgressions? (10-11)

Implicit here is the suggestion that the denial buried in the dead centre of the “American Dream”’s identificatory machine somehow intersects with, even feeds on, the difficulty of investigating American cultural memory without disrupting narratives that are seen as constitutive to the nation. Cheng suggests that Asian Americans occupy a “truly ghostly position in American racialization” (23) not only because the “model minority” stereotype is often used to discipline, and essentialize, the failure of other racialized communities to achieve the American Dream, but also because such seemingly “positive” representation is configured by economic achievement only, thus denying Asian Americans full subjectivities. Toni Morrison, alluding to her own problematic position as an African-American writer within a national literature that she sees as the “preserve of white male views, genius, and power” (*Playing in the Dark* 5), wryly observes, too, that “living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular



landscape for a writer” (*Playing in the Dark* xiii). In fact, Cheng’s analysis of the American racial culture under the rubric of melancholia proves as exciting as it is valuable because it lays bare the complex dynamics of desire and rejection that lock the dominant and the racialized in mutual projection, thus maintaining a form of *status quo* between them. It is Hamid’s representations of this *status quo* that I wish to investigate now, first through the protagonist’s relationship with Jim, the relentlessly forward-looking recruiting manager of a valuation firm who makes Changez’s dream of material success come true, then through Changez’s relationship with Erica, the woman who promises her Pakistani suitor entrance into the sophisticated whiteness of Manhattan.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* tells the story of an encounter in Lahore between an unnamed American stranger and the oddly-named protagonist Changez,<sup>1</sup> a Pakistani returnee from the US in a post- 9/11 context. The peculiar form of dialogue which develops between the two men throughout the book comes to represent the framing device within which Changez narrates his “failed love-story” (Hamid, qtd. in Yamin) with the US, ranging from his pre-9/11 success-story, through his post-9/11 disillusionment, to his return to Pakistan and his turning to a “reluctant” form of fundamentalism. As the narrative unfolds and consistently silences the voice of the American addressee, it becomes clear that Changez dominates the dialogue to the point of turning it into a sheer monologue, as if he had the power to eat up the speech of his interlocutor. It has been repeatedly pointed out that the absent presence of such disembodied American “you” in the text constitutes a means, for Hamid, to indirectly “write back” to his Western readership via the increasingly bitter, accusing tone of his protagonist.<sup>2</sup> Less critical attention has been paid, however, to the ways in which

this monologue hiding between a dialogue-mask, indeed this covert speech-ingestion, refigures a form of psychic cannibalism that seems to have been at work in the protagonist's de-selfing experience in the US, notably in his interactions with Jim, the recruiting manager who facilitated Changez's material accession to the American Dream yet also provoked his expulsion from the Promised Land.

Embedded within the story of his encounter with the mysterious American man and cadenced by the different courses of a meal during which Changez ominously enjoins his foreign guest to "dirty [his] hands" (123) so that he can savour typically Pakistani "predatory delicacies" (101), Changez's narration of his encounter with Jim gradually reveals the extent to which his enlisting in a New York valuation firm, Underwood Samson, and instant promotion as Jim's protégé, is dependent on an identificatory system "whitewashing" Changez's Pakistaniness and locking the protagonist into narcissistic identifications with his Anglo-American boss. Foregrounding his past uneasiness at Jim's confessional tone and recurrent displays of intimacy, Changez deviously remarks to his American listener that "the confession that implicates its audience is [ ... ] a devilishly difficult ball to play. Reject it and you slight the confessor; accept it and you admit your own guilt" (70). Of course, the fact that the equation is reversed and that the narrator is now the one who, in a Jim-like fashion, force-feeds the story of his progressive disenchantment with the US to his silent American listener, turns his remark into a half ironic, half menacing warning that the one-sided dialogue taking place in Lahore certainly re-enacts, and perhaps even aims to redress, the psychic devouring mediated through Jim's perverse rhetoric of interlocked recognition and confession. The uncertainty as to whether the "carnivorous feast" (101) promised to his interlocutor in Lahore announces Changez's immolation or the putting to death of his American guest,

indeed exacerbates the ambiguous eating-dynamics inherent in Jim's "invitation to identity",<sup>3</sup> recurrently constructing Changez as a "shark" (70) hungry for upward mobility, yet covertly consuming his cultural and racial difference, to the point where the protagonist himself comes to believe that his Pakistaniness is in fact invisible, "cloaked by [his] suit, by [his] expense account, and – most of all – by [his] companions" (71). The suggestion that his boss reshapes Changez's personal history in an attempt to contain his identity is emphasized through Jim's repeated praise of what he sees as Changez's "difference", which is nothing more, in reality, than the sense of social shame that he shares with his protégé and that fuels the race-free, all-American "rags to riches" standard narrative into which he has cast his own life. In her essay "Moving through America", Anna Hartnell aptly associates Jim's specular appropriation of Changez's past and supposedly lowly beginnings with a colonizing gesture, diagnosing Jim's apparently self-deprecatory assertion that he and his protégé "are blood from some part of the body that the species do not need anymore" (97) as a symptom of "the European imperial tendency to treat colonized cultures as the past of the western narrative of progress" (Hartnell 341). That Jim's disdain for the past intersects with what Hartnell calls a "utilitarian version of the melting pot" (342) within which the shedding of "old" loyalties and cultural particularities is crucial to the construction of a "new" American self, is apparent in Jim's determination to convince Changez that his "Pakistani side" is eating at him (120), while the post-9/11 context makes it even clearer that the ethnic part of hyphenated identities must remain skin-deep and definitely not hinder the pursuit of "true" Americanness. In many ways, Changez's relationship with Jim – and through him, with Underwood Samson, the valuation firm whose initials symbolically echo those of the US nation – reproduces the "absolute claim" (Hartnell 342) that America

places on its newest immigrants, to the extent that Changez's "difference" is only valued by Jim if it can be co-opted and altered, first through its reinscription into pre-existing raceless romances of upward mobility, then through its relegation to the past, indeed to the prehistory of Changez's American mimic self.

Clearly, Jim's authority is constituted and sustained through what Cheng calls "the system of the suspended other" (16), which positions him as the "original real" Changez must strive (and fail) to be. The commingling of histories and identities that Jim forces upon his protégé can be seen as strategically melancholic in myriad ways, since Changez can fully identify with the negative-turned-positive representation of outsider, indeed with Jim's projection onto him of the memory of his younger self "grow[ing] up outside the candy store" (71), only if he reifies himself as Jim's melancholic object and forfeits the specificities of his own history which, unlike Jim's, is dominated by a form of intergenerational longing for the past grandeur of his family in Lahore. A replacement crypt of sorts within which Jim conceals, preserves and distances that part of himself which nevertheless guarantees the authenticity of his "rags to riches" scenario, Changez is enlisted to reflecting back what it is that Jim has invested in him, including the belief that Jim can never truly revert to his "inferior" younger self, that is, Changez. Perversely enough, Jim's election of Changez as melancholic object prepares the protagonist for his own career in melancholia, to the extent that Changez can secure his position at Underwood Samson only if he complies with mimic images of himself that deny him a full subjectivity while promising to function as deformed identificatory poles in the future, making it ever-increasingly difficult, moreover, to contest the dominant order of things without turning such angry dialogue inwards. Equally importantly, the generic story of dispossession that Jim elevates as the mark of the exclusiveness of

his protégé and as the stamp of his entitlement to the American Dream imprisons Changez within a melancholic dilemma as regards his “real” story of origins, since this story of loss needs to be repressed and at the same time also cultivated for its putative self-defining, “Americanness-reinforcing” value.

Back to Pakistan for the first time after the 9/11 attacks make the US retreat into what Changez sees as an insufferable form of chauvinism and aggressive self-righteousness, the protagonist is outraged by the American bombing of Afghanistan, at the same time as he starts becoming painfully aware of the “Americanness of [his] own gaze” (124). Now determined to exorcize the “unwelcome sensibility by which [he] had become possessed,” Changez experiences bouts of self-contempt as he flies back to the US before his dis/identification from Jim and his subsequent expulsion from the country, which more prefigures a melancholic incorporation of the US as a broken mirror and lost ideal, however, than a real letting go of his American Dream, as the next part of my essay will show.

The turn from “melancholic object” to “subject of melancholia” that Changez’s de-selfing experience in the US generates is particularly evident in the trajectory of his relationship with Erica, a white, upper-class budding writer whom Changez starts to woo at the beginning of the book and is forced to give up after she gets institutionalized in the aftermath of the attacks. In the same way that a supposedly “shared” narrative of dispossession, indeed a “wounded attachment” to such a narrative,<sup>4</sup> provides the melancholic framework upon which Jim secures his white authority, so the notion of home, or rather, its fantasy, proves central to Changez’s and Erica’s relationship, to the point where “missing home” comes to represent a form of intimacy cue between the two characters. Ambiguously remarking that Changez “gives off a strong sense of home” (19) at the start of their

relationship, Erica later defines “home” as a dead person, Chris, her childhood sweetheart turned teenage lover (28). For Changez, the feeling of “coming home” as he settles in New York, and of being “at home” in Erica’s luxurious penthouse, is recurrently tied up to his concern about status, and more precisely to his longing to retrieve the past grandeur of his family in Lahore. As he becomes Erica’s official escort at the events of New York society, Changez proves quite intent on remarking that he “[is] entering in New York the very same social class that [his] family [is] falling out of in Lahore” (85). Changez’s commodification of Erica is apparent, too, in his determination to stress her trophy-wife-like “regal” (17) appearance or to see in her an “empress-in-waiting” (80) who can introduce him into the chic heart of Manhattan while “vouch[ing] for [his] worthiness” (85). Moreover, the protagonist’s belief that his relationship with Erica is in fact “meant to be” (85) projects a sense of entitlement on to the interlocking fantasies of home and privilege that his WASP girlfriend embodies. This gives an even more unsettling turn to Changez’s endorsement of the Aryan myth so as to rationalize the noble genealogy of his people as well as their superiority at a time, he insists, when “the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians” (34).

Ironically, the apparent ease with which Changez parades Erica (or is paraded by her) before the Manhattan elite only matches the growing unease characterizing the couple’s physical intimacy. Changez’s apparent fantasy of “getting back to the heart of whiteness” through Erica is brutally shattered, moreover, as the latter gradually withdraws into herself after the 9/11 attacks and gets retroactively “haunted” (80) by her dead lover Chris. Remarking that Erica’s “illness of the spirit” (140) is initiated, or rather, is reactivated, at the same time as a traumatized post 9/11-Am/Erica gives itself over to what Changez laments as “a dangerous nostalgia,

[...] a determination to look back” (115), many critics have pointed out that Changez’s and Erica’s failed love affair is allegorical of America’s relationship to its immigrant communities.<sup>5</sup> If it is true, as Richard Dyer argues in *White*, that “many of the fundamentals of all levels of Western culture [ ... ] come to us from Christianity” (15), it is certainly worth pushing this allegory further to the odd love triangle formed by the protagonist, Erica, and Chris/Christ, the incorporeal presence Am/Erica cannot “get over”. For, witnessing Erica’s decline, Changez increasingly resorts to a ghostly form of Christian imagery to characterize his lover, who seems “otherworldly” (89) to him as he first tries to make love to her and who glows with “something not unlike the fervour of the devout” (133) as he visits her for the last time in an institution. Fascinated as he is at first by the “crack” that he glimpses in his lover’s eyes and that significantly evokes “an almost familiar tenderness” (59) in him, Changez nevertheless comes to understand that Chris’s and Erica’s love boils down to “a religion that would not accept [him] as a convert” (114).

In opposition to Erica, whose memory of Chris is triggered by snow, certainly the “whitest thing on earth,” as Dyer has it (21), the protagonist emphasizes the contrast between the “sickly white” colour of Erica’s skin and the “healthy brown” quality of his own (112), thus coding whiteness not as purity, but as disease. This is not to say that Changez starts mourning the lost ideal of whiteness, and renounces the compelling fantasy of possessing Erica, even if it means taking on the persona of his dead rival. For the passage in which the protagonist enjoins his lover to believe that he is Chris as he tries to make love to her evokes a triangular commingling of identities akin to a sort of indirect reincarnation – or rather, a form of melancholic incorporation:

I do not know how to describe my experience of what happened next; I cannot, of course, claimed that I was *possessed*, but at the same time I did not seem to be myself. It was as though we were under a spell, transported to a world where I was Chris and she was with Chris, and we made love with a physical intimacy that Erica and I never enjoyed. Her body denied mine no longer; I watched her shut eyes, and her shut eyes watched *him*. (105)

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha reminds us that “to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus” (44). In Hamid’s book though, it seems that Erica’s look is turned inwards to such an extent that it calls Changez into un-being instead -- a form of un-being that travels back to the onlooker once Changez’s embodiment of Chris generates a point of contact with the invisibility of whiteness, thus threatening its centrality and revealing the emptiness at its core. In the above excerpt, Erica’s gaze indeed conveys no sense of otherness to Changez, reflecting back to him only Chris -- that is, no living matter or “real” being, just an empty mirror of idealized whiteness. Possibly, Changez’s impossible sighting of his dead rival via Erica’s “shut eyes” derives from the fact that he has gained new insight into the melancholic play of substitutions through which he was unwittingly enlisted to sustaining (Am)Erica’s fiction of a full self. He was both hosting and reflecting back to her an idealized whiteness whose reality she was consequently able to ignore – only to realize that his post 9/11 refusal to host such ideal now leaves not one, but two gaping holes in the mirror. In other words, Changez’s sense that Erica has little choice but to “swallow” the dead ideal that she is now unable to locate in the eyes of “racial others” such as himself, reflects back to his own sense of self,



notably to the ways in which his lacking a “stable core” (148), his having had “nothing of substance” to give his lover, might have “pushed Erica deeper into her own confusion” (148). His guilt, far from helping him to realize that at the root of their pre-9/11 mutual infatuation with each other little more was at stake than a fantasy built on absences, now constitutes the ultimate psychic register through which Changez is still able not only to fashion a central subject-position for himself as regards his lover, but also to cover up the phantomized nature of his own self. To return to the above passage, it is no wonder, then, that Changez incarnates his lover’s object of desire even while Erica’s “shut eyes” indicate that Changez’s eligibility as an erotic choice (metaphorically speaking, his eligibility within the US) relies on his guilty compliance in the face of his non-visibility – relies, in fact, on Changez’s model-minority self-definition through negation, as “not-Chris” only. However, being both Chris and “not-Chris”, if only for a moment, through his role-playing, Changez is melancholically made to enjoy his own rejection, at the same time as the gap opened by his partially successful performance of a Chris-identity reveals Chris for what it is: not the “real thing” but “the morphology of ghostliness” (Cheng 20) itself. As if to better imply that (white) non-existence is in fact what Changez’s lover yearns for through her devotion to the aptly-named Chris, Erica vanishes from the surface of the earth after having presumably committed suicide, leaving Changez to return to Pakistan without having reconciled himself to the reality of her death.

The suggestion that Changez himself is now devoted to the lost ideal of whiteness, doubly riveted to an absence turned into an absolute via his retention of Chris through Erica, is emphasized towards the end of the narrative, as the protagonist confesses to his American interlocutor that he engages in the same kind of mental conversation and daydreaming with Erica as she used to pursue with Chris.

To this extent, Changez's final turn to fundamentalism leaves the lost ideal of whiteness unchallenged. "Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us" (174), Changez reflects as the tension builds up to a climactic point between the American mysterious stranger and himself. Only murder, or self-slaughter, can allow the reluctant Changez to regain a sense of self by killing the melancholic "thing-within" which Hamid refigures, or so it seems, as fundamentalism's "psychic citizenship" (Eng & Han 366) with the lost ideal of whiteness.

### Notes on contributor

Delphine Munos is a doctoral student at the University of Liège, Belgium. Her dissertation focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's recent work and examines how Lahiri redefines the notion of arrival as regards the U.S.-born Indian-American second generation. Her articles on Jhumpa Lahiri and Shauna Singh Baldwin were published respectively in *Commonwealth, Essays and Studies* (2008), and *Postcolonial Text* (2011).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In view of the obvious symbolic nature of Erica's and Chris's names, the meaning behind Changez's name has given rise to much speculation. Contradicting the suggestion that "Changez" is too close a homophone of "changes" not to evoke renewal and a future-oriented subjectivity – which is certainly what an English-speaking western readership would venture at first – Hamid specifies that "Changez" is the Urdu version of the name "Ghenghis" ("We are already afraid"), as in Ghenghis Khan, the warlord who conquered territories ranging from the edges of present-day Europe to China.

<sup>2</sup> In her essay on the postcolonial novel after September 11, Margaret Scanlan writes, for instance, that the silence of the American interlocutor is "much of the novel's point" and she goes on to quote an interview with Hamid in which he states that, "in the world of [ ... ] the American media, it's almost always the other way around"; representatives of the Islamic world "mostly seem to be speaking in grainy videos from caves" (qtd. in Scanlan, 274).

<sup>3</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Homi K. Bhabha ("Foreword").

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Brown elaborates on the concept of “wounded attachment” in the third chapter of her *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Interestingly for my (melancholic) purposes, Brown argues that “in its attempts to displace its suffering, identity structured by *ressentiment* at the same time becomes invested in its own subjection. [ ... ] Identity politics structured by *ressentiment* reverse without subverting [the] blaming structure [of the liberal discursive order]; they do not subject to critique the sovereign subject of accountability that liberal individualism presupposes, nor the economy of inclusion and exclusion that liberal universalism establishes” (qtd. in Eng & Han 369).

<sup>5</sup> This is a claim Hamid himself partially endorses in Yamin, “Mohsin Hamid in Conversation”.

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